

## Use of Place Names on Road Signposts. Examples of Practice in Central Europe

*Peter Jordan*  
Austria

### **Abstract**

Signposts at major roads and motorways hinting at places in neighbouring countries address drivers from different countries speaking different languages. It cannot be expected that, e.g., a French driver knows how German or Hungarian speakers call Prague [Praha] or how a Hungarian speaker calls Vienna [Wien]. Road signposts are therefore first of all to apply endonyms in the sense of names in the local language of the place indicated and only possibly and additionally names in the language, where the signpost is located (exonyms). But practice varies. In some countries indeed only endonyms are shown on road signposts, in other countries also the exonym is given. In several countries practice is not uniform. The paper examines the practice in several countries of Central Europe and formulates guidelines for the use of place names on road signposts, regarding also the question of how to proceed when places indicated on the signpost or the signpost itself are located in a multilingual area.

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### **1. Introduction**

Signposts at major roads and motorways hinting at places in neighbouring countries address drivers from different countries speaking different languages. It cannot be expected that, e.g., a French driver knows how Germans or Hungarians call Prague [Praha] or how Hungarians call Vienna [Wien]. Road signposts are therefore first of all to apply endonyms in the sense of names in the local language of the place indicated and only possibly and additionally names in the language where the signpost is located (exonyms). Legislation, at least in German-speaking countries, corresponds roughly to these principles, but practice varies. A much wider variation can be observed, when a larger number of Central European countries is taken into consideration. In some countries indeed only endonyms are shown on road signposts, in other countries also the exonym is given, even in the first position, in exceptional cases even without being accompanied by the endonym. Within some countries practice is not uniform.

This paper examines legislation in the German-speaking countries as well as practice in several countries of Central Europe trying to answer the following questions:

- Do road signposts use endonyms or exonyms for destinations in other language areas?
- Do road signposts use other variant names, e.g., names in minority languages?

It formulates recommendations for the use of place names on road signposts as they have been passed by the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names [Ständiger Ausschuss für geographische Namen, StAGN], the German national names board with coordinating functions for the group of German-speaking countries.

## 2. Legislation in German-speaking countries <sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Germany

Source: RWBA. 2000: *Richtlinien für die wegweisende Beschilderung auf Autobahnen*. Kapitel 3: Zielangaben und Bezeichnung der Knotenpunkte: 3.2.6 Schreibweise: [Ziffer] (2)

*Translated text:*

When directions are given for destinations in neighbouring countries in general the foreign spelling has to be used. If the toponym is linguistically very divergent, the German spelling can be used and the foreign name may be placed after the German word separated from it by a slash (e.g., Breslau/Wrocław).

Original text:

Bei grenzüberschreitender Wegweisung ist für Ziele in benachbarten Ländern im allgemeinen die ausländische Schreibweise zu wählen. Bei starker sprachlicher Abweichung der Ortsbezeichnung kann die deutsche Schreibweise verwendet werden und die ausländische Bezeichnung durch Schrägstrich getrennt nachgestellt werden (z.B. Breslau/Wrocław).

### 2.2 Austria

Source: *Bundesgesetz vom 6. Juli 1960, mit dem Vorschriften über die Straßenpolizei erlassen werden* (Straßenverkehrsordnung 1960 - StVO. 1960). StF: BGBl. Nr. 159/1960 idF BGBl. I Nr. 94/2004, 151/2004, 15/2005, 19/2005, 52/2005, 99/2005, 54/2006 und 152/2006 § 53. Die Hinweiszeichen [Ziffer] (2)

*Translated text*

On advance signposts, regular signposts and destination information boards, the names of places situated in other countries are to be indicated by the spelling, official in the relevant country (e.g., Bratislava, Sopron, Maribor). The additional indication of a possible German name is admissible (e.g., Pressburg, Ödenburg, Marburg).

Original text:

Auf Vorwegweisern, Wegweisern und Orientierungstafeln sind die Namen von Orten, die im Ausland liegen, nach der offiziellen Schreibweise des betreffenden Staates anzugeben (z.B. Bratislava, Sopron, Maribor). Die zusätzliche Anführung einer allfälligen *deutschsprachigen Ortsbezeichnung ist zulässig* (z.B. *Preßburg, Ödenburg, Marburg*).

### 2.3 Switzerland

Source: *Signalisationsverordnung (SSV) vom 5. September 1979* (Stand am 22. Oktober 2002) Art. 49 Grundsätze [Ziffer] 1

*Translated text:*

On city and town signs, road signs, advance signposts and highway directional signs (Art. 50-53), place names are written in the language spoken at the place indicated, for places with populations of mixed language backgrounds, in the language of the majority. If a place is written differently in two languages, the entrance sign to the town/settlement should display both spellings, if the smaller language group comprises at least 30 percent of the inhabitants.

Original text:

Ortsnamen werden auf Ortschaftstafeln, Wegweisern, Vorwegweisern und Einspurtafeln (Art. 50-53) in der Sprache geschrieben, die am bezeichneten Ort gesprochen wird, für gemischte Orte in der Sprache der Mehrheit der Einwohner. Wird eine Ortschaft in zwei Sprachen verschieden geschrieben, trägt die Vorderseite der Ortschaftstafel beide Schreibweisen, wenn die kleinere Sprachgruppe wenigstens 30 Prozent der Einwohner umfasst.

### 3. Practice in some countries of Central Europe

#### *Type 1: only endonym(s), Subtype 1.1: no variant names*

In other language areas, this type of signpost shows destination names in just the locally official language, i.e., the endonym, but no variant names in official minority languages, i.e., other endonyms.

This type fully coincides with practice in the **Czech Republic** (Fig. 1) as well as in **Slovakia** (Fig. 2). This use in both countries is based on the traditions of Czechoslovakia, which already displayed a cultured state in the interwar period, but even more so during the Communist era: a strict policy of avoiding the use of exonyms not only on road signposts, but also in most other fields of communication. This policy was conducted with the expectation that other languages in turn apply no exonyms for places in Czechoslovakia. This deal would have favoured Czechoslovakia, since other languages, in particular German and Hungarian, had enjoyed former dominance over Czechoslovakian territories and had therefore many more names for places in Czechoslovakia than vice versa.



**Fig. 1:** In the Czech Republic near the Austrian border. Vienna is indicated just by its official German endonym *Wien* and not (also) by the Czech exonym *Vídeň*. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)



**Fig. 2:** On a motorway through Bratislava (Slovakia). Only the German endonym *Wien* is shown, not the Slovak exonym *Viedeň*. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)

***Type 1: only endonym(s), Subtype 1.2: also variant names (in languages locally official in the destination)***

In contrast to Subtype 1.1, this subtype reflects also variant names, if they have official status in the destination. This corresponds to practice in **Italy**, which has amended its minority legislation in recent times and has elevated many place names in minority languages to an official status. Italian road signposts respect, of course, also official Italian place names in neighbouring countries (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 3:** On an Italian motorway near the Austrian border. Only the German endonym *Villach* is indicated for this Austrian destination, while the frequently used Italian exonym *Villaco* does not occur. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 17 April 2006)



**Fig. 4:** In Trieste (Italy) near the Slovenian border. The Italian names *Capodistria* and *Rabuiese* for the Slovenian places Koper and Škofije are both official names also in Slovenia and can therefore be regarded as endonyms. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 May 2006)

Fig. 5 and 6 reflect the respecting of all locally official languages on Italian road signposts. Both examples are taken from the Autonomous Region Friuli – Venezia Giulia in the Northeast of the country, populated by a Friulian speaking group, who forms a population minority throughout the Autonomous Region, but dominates the mountainous part of the Region and constitutes also a strong pillar for the identity of the entire Region. In the mountainous part of the Region there also reside small pockets of Germans and Slovenes. Nowadays, their linguistic presence is rather more symbolic than real, but it contributes to the multicultural image of the Region and to specific local identities, which for economic (touristic) reasons, are not among the least emphasized.



**Fig. 5:** Near the German language island Sauris/Zahre in Friuli – Venezia Giulia (Italy). All locally official names are reflected. The Italian name is always in first position (*Sauris, Lateis, Ampezzo*), official variant names in second (German *Zahre*, Friulian *Latais* and *Dimpeç*). (Photo: Peter Jordan, 27 July 2006)



**Fig. 6:** At Lago di Predil near Tarvisio in Friuli – Venezia Giulia (Italy). Names in all locally (semi-) official languages (Italian, Friulian, German, Slovene) are displayed. This means for country names also the use of exonyms (*Austria, Austrie, Avstrija; Slovenia, Slovenie, Slowenien*). (Photo: Peter Jordan, 16 June 2006)

**Type 1: only endonym(s), Subtype 1.3: uncommonly also exonyms, no other variant names**

This subtype reflects the situation in **Austria**, where road signposts hinting at destinations in neighbouring countries earlier used to have exonyms and where this practice has left some rare traces as can be seen on Fig. 7 and 8. But in the vast majority of instances only the (non-German) endonym is used (Fig. 9), even if the destination has an official or semi-official German variant name (as in the cases of Sopron and Tarvisio, Fig. 10, 11).



**Fig. 7:** On a motorway near Linz (Austria). Only the German exonym *Prag*, not the Czech endonym *Praha* is shown (Photo: Hubert Bergmann, August 2008).



**Fig. 8:** In the Austrian province Styria [Steiermark] on the motorway south of Graz. The Slovene endonym *Maribor* in the first position is accompanied by the German exonym *Marburg*. Maribor is the centre of Slovenian Styria [Štajerska], which was separated from Austrian Styria only after World War I. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 July 2007)



**Fig. 9:** In Austria near to the Czech border. Only the Czech endonym *Brno* is indicated; *Brünn* would be the widely used German exonym. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)



**Fig. 10:** In German-speaking Austria very near the Hungarian border. Only the Hungarian variant of the two official endonym versions *Sopron/Ödenburg* (Hungarian, German) is used. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)





**Fig. 11:** In the Austrian province of Carinthia [Kärnten] near the Italian border. Only the Italian endonym *Tarvisio* is represented, although the German name *Tarvis* is semi-official and the destination was part of the same province up to 1918. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 May 2006)

*Type 1: only endonym(s), Subtype 1.4: rarely also exonyms, also other variant names (in minority languages official and non-official at the destination)*

This subtype is represented by practice in **Croatia**, where the use of exonyms for destinations in other countries occurs as a rare exception and just on older signposts (Fig. 12). The prevailing practice by far is to show only the endonym in the official majority language (Fig. 13). A specific situation with current Croatian road signposts is the use of not only official minority names for places in the home country, but also of variant names, which are not official in the destination location, but correspond to an official minority language at the place where the signpost is located (Fig. 14).



**Fig. 12:** In Croatia near Buzet and the Slovenian border. *Kopar* is the Croatian exonym for the Slovene endonym *Koper*. *Capodistria* would be the second (Italian) endonym of the destination, but is not shown. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 May 2006)



**Fig. 13:** In Croatia near Buje/Buia and the Slovenian border. The road sign shows only endonyms for destinations in neighbouring countries, i.e., for Italian *Trieste* and for Slovenian *Koper*. Official variant names like the Italian *Capodistria* for Koper are not indicated. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 May 2006)



**Fig. 14:** In Buje/Buia, an Italian minority town in Croatia. All variant names in languages official at the site of the signpost are indicated for destinations in Croatia, whether the names are official in the destination (Italian *Pola*, *Umago*) or not (Italian *Fiume*). The Croatian city of Rijeka (in Italian *Fiume*) has an Italian minority, but in contrast to Pula/Pola or Umag/Umago this minority is in relation to the city population too small to assume group rights. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 May 2006)

**Type 2: exonym + endonym(s), Subtype 2.1: no variant names**

A representative of this type is **Hungary**, before World War I thrice as large as today and from 1867 until 1918 except for a very few common matters of state an autonomous part of the dual Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. All current neighbours share parts of former Hungarian territory and host partly sizeable Hungarian minorities. In Hungarian historiography these former territories play an important role and emotional ties with them still are intense. This may explain why Hungarian road signposts place Hungarian exonyms in the first position followed by the endonym (Fig. 15-18). Relative graphical arrangement of the two names, however, makes it sometimes difficult to recognize whether the name pair refers to the same place or to different places (Fig. 18). Official minority names, also of places in the same country, are not represented on Hungarian road signposts (Fig. 17, 18) – much in contrast to signposts entering settlements, which are frequently bilingual.



**Fig. 15:** In Hungary near the Austrian and Slovakian borders. The German endonym for Vienna (*Wien*) is preceded by the Hungarian exonym *Bécs*; so is the Slovakian endonym *Bratislava* by the Hungarian exonym *Pozsony*. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)



**Fig. 16:** In western Hungary. As usual, precedence is given to the Hungarian exonym *Zágráb* over the Croatian endonym *Zagreb*, but the usual hyphen between the two names is missing. The Slovene endonym *Ljubljana* is not preceded by a Hungarian exonym, although such an exonym exists (*Laibach*). But it coincides with the German name and Ljubljana was never a part of Hungary. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)



**Fig. 17:** In western Hungary near the Austrian border. *Bécsújhely* is the Hungarian exonym for the Austrian town Wiener Neustadt. The official German variant name *Wolfs* for the Hungarian village Balf is not reflected by the signpost. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)



**Fig. 18:** Entering Sopron (Hungary) near the Austrian border. From the arrangement of the names *Kismarton* and *Eisenstadt* it is not easy to recognize that *Kismarton* is the Hungarian exonym and *Eisenstadt* the German endonym of the same place (in Austria). The officially bilingual (Hungarian/German) Hungarian places Sopron/Ödenburg and Brennbergbánya/Brennberg are only represented by their Hungarian name version. (Photo: Peter Jordan, 22 April 2006)

***Type 2: exonym + endonym(s), Subtype 2.2: also variant names (in languages locally official in the destination)***

This practice is applied in **Slovenia**. It differs from practice in Hungary by the consequent use of official variant names for places in the same country as well as in neighbouring countries and by the consequent separation of all name variants by a slash (Fig. 19), which makes interpretation always clear.

The prominent use of exonyms may in the Slovenian case be explained by the fact that Slovenia conceives itself just as the core of a larger region influenced by Slovenian culture. This larger region still hosts Slovene minorities and comprises north-eastern parts of Italy including Trieste and Gorizia as well as southern parts of Austria and southwest Hungary.



**Fig. 19:** In the Slovenian town Koper/Capodistria. Destinations in neighbouring countries are presented by the Slovene exonym in the first position (*Trst, Pulj*) separated from the endonym(s) by a slash. Official variant names are represented for destinations both in the home country (Italian *Dragogna, Semedella*) and in neighbouring countries (Italian *Pola* for the Croatian town Pula). (Photo: Peter Jordan, 1 May 2006)

### Other observations

Instead of indicating destinations and directions by names of settlements, road signposts frequently also use exonyms of country names, e.g., in the Czech Republic Czech *Rakousko* for the official German form *Österreich*, in Austria the German name *Ungarn* for the official Hungarian form *Magyarország*. This may not always be transparent for drivers who are not very acquainted with the language of the country they are just passing through.

Another practice frequently to be observed is the use of abbreviations of country names as they occur on cars (e.g., SLO, HR, H, CZ). This may be more transparent for a multilingual audience, but shares with the former practice the disadvantage of being much less precise than an indication by settlement names.

A third practice with the indication of destinations in neighbouring countries is to replace the name of a larger place in a neighbouring country, the country name or the country name's abbreviation by the name of the border station in the home country. This practice may, however, become obsolete, after border stations will have been deactivated within the Schengen zone. It is also all but indicative in the successor states of Yugoslavia or other dissolved federations, where border stations are rather new and their names not familiar to the international traveller.

A case in point highlighting the dilemma is the Croatian border station Lipovac at the Croatian-Serbian border, the name of which figures on Croatian motorway signposts instead of the destination name *Beograd*.

## 4. Recommendations

Based on legal regulations in German-speaking countries and on the above mentioned findings regarding the practice in several Central European countries, the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names [Ständiger Ausschuss für geographische Namen, StAGN], the German

national names board with coordinative functions for the group of German-speaking countries has passed three principal recommendations related to the use of geographical names on road signposts. They will be submitted to the relevant administrative authorities in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

(1) Road signposts address the international and multilingual community of drivers and are to apply in the first position the name as it can be found on the signpost in the destination and on road maps, i.e., the endonym. Examples: *Wrocław* instead of *Breslau*, *Bratislava* instead of *Pressburg*.

[Verkehrshinweisschilder wenden sich an die international und vielsprachig zusammengesetzte Gruppe der Verkehrsteilnehmer und sollen daher den Zielort an erster Stelle mit dem Endonym im Sinne des amtlichen Namens, der auch auf den Ortstafeln des Zielorts und in Straßenkarten verwendet wird, bezeichnen. Beispiele: *Wrocław* anstelle von *Breslau*, *Bratislava* anstelle von *Pressburg*.]

(2) If a destination has more than one official name, all names are to be represented, since all these names are officially recognized and equal in rank. For graphic separation and as expression of equality the slash is most appropriate. Examples: *Bozen/Bolzano*, *Biel/Bienne*, *Sopron/Ödenburg*. [Wenn ein Zielort mehrere amtliche Namen hat, sind alle darzustellen, denn diese Namen sind amtlich anerkannt gleichwertig. Zur graphischen Trennung und als Ausdruck der Gleichwertigkeit beider Namen bietet sich der Schrägstrich an. Beispiele: *Bozen/Bolzano*, *Biel/Bienne*, *Sopron/Ödenburg*.]

(3) If an exonym is added in the second position, it should be clear by design and arrangement that this is another, secondary name of the same destination and not a part of the first name or a name equal in rank. The exonym may graphically be indicated by italics, smaller letters or brackets. Examples: *Wrocław Breslau*, *Wrocław* Breslau, *Wrocław* (Breslau). [Wenn an zweiter Stelle Exonyme hinzugefügt werden, soll durch *graphische Anordnung und Gestaltung deutlich erkennbar sein, dass es sich um eine andere, nachgeordnete Namenform desselben Ortes und nicht um einen gleichwertigen Namen oder einen Teil des ersten Namens handelt. Diese graphische Kennzeichnung des Exonyms könnte durch Kursivschrift erfolgen, oder aber durch Schreibung des Namens in einer kleineren Schrift oder durch Klammerung. Beispiele: Wrocław Breslau, Wrocław Breslau, Wrocław (Breslau)*.]

### Note

1. The author is very obliged to Michael Duschanek for investigating the legal regulations of the three countries and filtering the relevant law texts.

Peter Jordan  
Austrian Academy of Sciences  
Institute for Urban and Regional Research  
Postgasse 7/4/2  
A – 100 Wien  
AUSTRIA  
peter.jordan@oeaw.ac.at